

THE BETTER PART.

A

SERMON

PREACHED AT THE FUNERAL

OF

MRS. ABBY B. BRADFORD,

AT

ASHLAND, MASS., SUNDAY, NOV. 4, 1855.

By

WILLIAM M. THAYER,

PASTOR OF THE ORTHODOX CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH.

PUBLISHED BY THE FRIENDS.

BOSTON:

PRINTED BY J. B. CHISHOLM, 5 WATER STREET.

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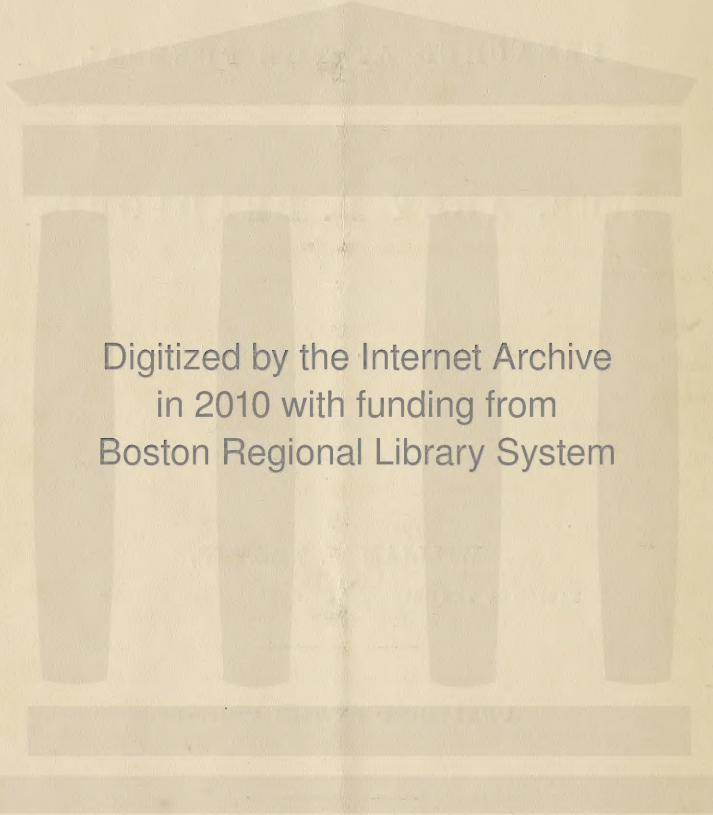
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S E R M O N .

PHILIPPIANS i. 23.

For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.

THERE is a period in the Christian's life when the attractions of earth and heaven seem nearly equal. For some reasons he desires to live ; for others he prefers to die. He is drawn in both directions, and is "in a strait betwixt two" in regard to his choice. It was so with the Apostle when he uttered the text. Earth had its attractions even for him ; not, indeed, in those scenes and possessions that make it dear to the unbeliever ; but in regard to its high responsibilities and labors of love. Ties of affection might have bound him to it, as it does the most faithful believer now, and, on this account, life might have been dear. There is nothing in this supposition inconsistent with the highest Christian character. It is not unlike the Savior to be strongly wed to living friends. The believer is the last person to be indifferent to the ties of kindred. More than all others, he ought to appreciate the endearments of social and domestic life, ordained by the kind Father for the improvement and bliss of mankind. Religion is hostile to nothing of innocence and love in our earthly relations. It hallows every tie of affection, and assumes only to consecrate them to the service and honor of Christ. Then, it is not inconsistent with true piety to suppose that the Apostle was bound to earth by other considerations than that of personal usefulness. Still, the latter is the principal reference of the text and context. This point, however, is not important to the object of this discourse. We have before us the fact that Paul scarcely knew whether to choose life or death. He desired both to live and to die. It

was difficult for him to say, in the circumstances, which was the stronger desire. This knowledge, derived from the text, is sufficient for my present purpose.

In the first place, let us enquire why Christians may desire to live.

Nothing is more evident than that one person may have greater reasons for wishing to live than another. One is bound to a larger and more endeared circle of relatives than another. One is more favorably situated in life for enjoyment and usefulness than multitudes. The plans and contemplated life-work of some may be more inviting than that of others. The parent has more ties, other things being equal, than those who are childless, to bind him to earth. The same is true of the wife and husband, and those in other relations of life. Each additional bond of union with living friends renders separation by death more trying. These connections impart attractions to earth. He who is an outcast and vagabond, like Cain, cannot appreciate the pangs of separation from kindred at death. Also, there are reasons why the wicked may desire to live more than the righteous. They cannot meet death in peace. They cannot reign with Christ. If they appreciate their relations to God in the least degree, they must cling to life. But the Christian may "desire to depart," and "be with Christ," because he is prepared. And yet, this preparation for death may furnish a good reason why he should desire to live. If he is truly fitted to dwell in heaven, he is just prepared to do good on earth. He who is prepared to die is fitted to live. Then he is qualified to accomplish the end of his being. But, without extending these thoughts, I remark that the Christian desires to live,

For the sake of surviving friends.—The dying believer knows that his departure will deeply wound the hearts of his affectionate kindred. To them he or she sustains important relations. It may be that of father, husband, son, brother; or that of mother, wife, daughter, sister; and each and all of these relations renders the departing one's life of priceless value to the living. His own "gain" may be infinite; but there is the loss to loved ones which weighs upon his mind. How sad and desolate will be those hearts, and that habitation, after the spirit quits its tabernacle of flesh! A voice hushed at the fire-side altar! That familiar step to be heard no more! A breach in the family circle to be seen at all times! One less at the table, at the family altar, in the pew, and everywhere that life creates a union or a duty! All this the dying saint understands. His memory is busy in recalling by-gone scenes, perhaps, when his own heart sighed and pined over the lifeless remains of some dear friend. He may have parted with a child, a companion or parent. He remembers well the unutterable anguish of his soul when he saw that cold and senseless clay

was all which remained of the beloved one. Oh, how like a wilderness did this world appear! Gloomy and funereal to him as a dark, dismal tomb! And all this he knows is to be experienced by those who surround his bed to see him die. Yes! They will spend hours and days in mourning over their blasted hopes. They may be submissive to the will of God; but this will not prevent the pangs that must naturally result from disappointed affection. Grace may fit them to bear the trial with the spirit of Christ himself; but it will not blunt or eradicate the sensibilities of their affectionate hearts.

Nor is this all. The support and happiness of others may depend upon his life and toils. His wisdom and counsels may be necessary in the family circle. It may seem scarcely possible for them to meet the obligations of life without his presence and aid. How often do we see individuals laid low in death when the earthly hopes of a whole family die with them! Each one of us can point to living Christians, whose lives, we think, are indispensable to the happiness, and even to the existence, of their families. Thus, other bonds than those of love unite believers to their friends.

Is it strange, then, that the expiring believer should desire to live for the sake of his kin? His life is more valuable to them if he has lived as he ought. The more valuable his life has been to Christ, the more it is worth to his family. The better he has lived, the more trying it is, in one particular, for his relatives to part with him. Is it surprising that he would live for their sakes?

The Christian may desire to live for his own sake. Ties not only bind friends to him, but ties, also, wed his heart to theirs. If he has walked as it becomes a child of God, their attachment to him does not exceed his attachment to them. The more closely he has walked in the footsteps of Christ, the more beauty and wisdom he beholds in the relationships of life, and the more unalloyed enjoyment he derives from them. He is not insensible to the interchanges of affection. He does not love his friends less because he has learned to love Christ more. If his heart is less on earth since it was more in heaven, it is not because it is chilled and hardened by the gospel. He has affections, and every fibre of his being entwines those who are bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. It is as trying to *his* human nature to leave his relatives as it is to theirs to see him leave. He had hoped to mingle in their society for many years to bless, and to be blest. How natural that his strong affections should adhere tenaciously to those kindred, even to the last hour of life! His imagination had created a large share of bliss to be derived by himself from intercourse with them; and can he now dash away the cup without a struggle in his heart? Will

he not look wistfully upon the coveted boon as he lays it down the bidding of his God ?

The Christian may desire to live for the sake of Christ. Here is the point, doubtless, where he begins to feel especially that he is in a "strait." He would live for Christ, and he would also die and reign with him in glory. With him, it is Christ on earth and Christ in heaven. He embodies in his feelings the words of the Apostle—"For whether we live, we live unto the Lord ; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord : whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord's." Here, I repeat, comes the perplexity—the drawing of earth and heaven. On this side of the grave Christ has a great work to be done ; on the other side he has great glories to be enjoyed. Here he has a world to redeem ; there he has a ransomed multitude, pure as the white robes which they wear. The dying Christian would continue on earth to leave his mark thereon. He would have a more direct agency in the spread of the gospel. He laments that he has done so little for Christ. Standing as he does upon the boundary line of two worlds, he has such a view of his personal responsibilities as he never had before. Though willing to bide God's time, and to drink whatever cup of suffering is mingled for him, his heart yearns over a godless world, and mourns over the little he has done to give to it the gospel of grace. He would live longer that he might live more acceptably to his divine Master. The true follower of Christ does not often lament, at death, his bitter experience ; but he does often lament, in that trying hour, that he has been so unprofitable a servant. Many times I have heard believers, on their death-beds, say, in substance—"Would that I might recover to do some good to my fellow men. My life appears like an empty dream, well nigh worthless to the Savior. If I could return to healthful life from this brink of the grave, it seems to me that I should accomplish much for my Redeemer. Oh, how can 'such a worthless worm as I' be received to mansions of eternal glory?" Said the believer, whose confined remains are now before us, at a time when she had been speaking of the preciousness of the Saviour, "I have wondered how such an unfaithful person as myself could ever enter heaven. I have been so cold in the service of my Redeemer ! Yet all my life he has been bestowing mercies upon me !" In such language the Christian often expresses his feelings on the death-bed ; and this view of his life may awaken within him a desire to live.

Frequently the believer, at death, feels more deeply than ever for the salvation of unconverted relatives. He has clearer views of their moral dangers. He never saw before as now on what "a slippery rock" they stand. If they were the children of God, he could ask no more. He would live in order to bring them to Christ. He thinks he has been re-

miss in duty toward them, or, if not remiss, that he could do something more to impress their minds, and induce them to give their hearts to God. How appropriate that he should wish to live for this great end ! It must be a struggle for him to submit to God and die, leaving behind him, in this world of temptation, unconverted parents, children, brothers, sisters, friends.

In the foregoing particulars the Christian may desire to live longer when his last sickness comes. Still, this desire does not conflict with submission to God. As I have already said, there is a period in his experience when the drawings towards earth and heaven appear to him nearly equal. But as he approaches the grave, the attractions of the "Better Land" become greater than those of earthly ties and usefulness. He can leave all things with a cheerful and happy spirit. It appears now so much "better" to reign above than to dwell below that his perplexity is removed. He can now choose whether to live or die. In striking the final balance in his mind, there is such an infinite difference between the two that he exclaims, in the sincerity of his heart, "To die is gain." It was so with the Apostle ; and the close of his life was triumphant and glorious. It is thus with every devoted follower of Christ.

Having noticed the attractions of earth to the dying Christian, we are prepared, in the second place, to consider the attractions of heaven.

"Having a desire to depart, and TO BE WITH CHRIST ; which is far better." Here is given the true reason for this desire of the apostle "to depart." We might particularize, and show how much, and that, this view of Christ embraces. We might show that "to be with Christ" is to be free from pain, free from sorrow, free from sin, and, in short, to enjoy all that is comprehended in the scriptural view of heaven. But we have not time to enlarge upon these points. Nor is it necessary. It is sufficient for our purpose to know that "to be with Christ" is to be in heaven—to possess and enjoy all that is symbolized by its crowns of life, its harps of gold, and its everlasting songs. We need not inquire whether it is a state or a place ; it is enough to be assured that it is where "the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters." The immediate presence of Christ is heaven enough to the immortal spirit ; and absence from him is hell, dark and terrible enough, to make any place or state beyond the boundaries of time one of "weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth. The Apostle uttered in the text no more than he had learned from the lips of Christ. The Savior never promised to his disciples any other Paradise than his immediate presence. "And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself, *that where I am there ye may be*

also." And more, he never asked of the Father any other heaven than this for his followers. "Father, I will that they also whom thou hast given me, be with me *where I am*." That will be ample glory and blessedness to satisfy the highest aspirations of the redeemed. All things else, without the Savior's presence, cannot constitute such a Paradise as the blood-washed soul anticipates.

Let the text be understood, then, as teaching that "to be with Christ" is the "saint's everlasting rest"—heaven. This, with a single additional thought, briefly expressed, must suffice for this part of the subject.

We find here a test of Christian hope. Mere *willingness* to die is not evidence of preparation for death. Bodily sufferings may be so intense as to cause the sinner to be willing, and even to desire to die. Rev. Albert Barnes says, "I have seen not a few persons who were not professed Christians on a bed of death, and not a few *willing* to die, not a few who *wished* to depart. But in the vast majority of instances it was because they were sick of life, or because their pain made them sigh for relief, or *because they were so wretched that they did not care what happened*—and this they and their friends construed into an evidence that they were prepared to die! In most instances this is a miserable delusion; in no case is a mere willingness to die an evidence of preparation for death." The Apostle was not willing to die because he was sick of life, or had been disappointed and persecuted, or because he was in perils on sea and land. For no such reason was he happy in relinquishing life. But he was *willing* solely because he would "be with Christ." Other Christians will be resigned to the Lord's will in death for the same reason. Here is the great difference between the righteous and the wicked when they exchange worlds. The latter may sometimes express a willingness to depart; but never because they will meet the Savior face to face. The former are peaceful and joyous for this reason alone. Visit a thousand death-beds, and this will be found the characteristic difference between the truly pious and wicked or self-deceived. It is pleasant to listen to the joyous exclamations of the expiring saint about meeting departed friends in glory. This is not inconsistent with genuine faith in God, provided it is not all, or the chief anticipation, that is expressed. If this be paramount to the desire and expectation of seeing the Savior, it is no evidence of fitness for heaven. It is not enough that the departing Christian is willing to sunder earthly ties, and commit his friends and himself to the care of his covenant-keeping God, nor that he desires to die and meet his deceased kin in glory. His soul must cry out for the Redeemer, and be satisfied only with the expectation of his immediate presence. He must desire more than all things else, "to be with Christ." This tests his union with him.

In the life and death of her, to whose remains we pay a sincere tribute of respect to-day, we have an illustration of the foregoing truths. She could say, with the Apostle, "For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better." She had many reasons for desiring to live — more reasons for wishing a longer life than multitudes who die. For the sake of a large circle of devoted friends she must have desired to live. To one of such ardent affections, family ties must have been doubly strong and sacred. She always seemed to appreciate the unfeigned love with which she was regarded as an only daughter and sister. For her own sake, too, she must have wished to remain longer here. Few are more devotedly attached to earthly friends than she was. A short time in her presence was sufficient to convince one of this. Besides, a single year had but just expired since she stood at the bridal altar and became a wife. This new relation brought with it fairer prospects than flatter the early wedded life of multitudes. All these things were suited to awaken in her soul the desire to live. That she desired life for the sake of Christ is evident from her language which I have quoted. Those words show that her mind labored upon the work to be done here in the vineyard of the Lord. She would live to perform a more self-sacrificing service for Christ. Nor would we be understood to mean by this, that she was remiss in duty. Would that all the followers of the Lamb were as exemplary in their lives! Then would they be as peaceful and triumphant in death.

Yet, with all these things to attract her to earth, she had "a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better." It was not because her sufferings were insupportable, nor that she had become weary of life, that she desired "to depart." It was because she longed to be with her Savior. In reply to the inquiry, "How does Christ appear to you now?" she replied, "Very precious," at the same time expressing her full conviction that he would sustain her in the hour of dissolution. At another time, when questioned about the severity of her sufferings, she said, "They seem greater sometimes than I can bear; and it has been my greatest fear that I should not be as patient as I ought. But my sufferings are nothing in comparison with those which Christ endured for me." At still another time, on seeing her deeply afflicted mother in tears, she requested her to desist, adding, for her consolation, "I am going home. I long to be with Christ." And yet again, when assuring her friends that her mind was peaceful and joyous, she added, "Yes, my Savior is with me." I call your attention to these expressions to show you that Christ filled her soul. It was her desire to dwell with him that secured her triumph over death. If there had been no Savior on the other side of "death's dark rolling river" to allure her there, how would her loving heart have clung to life!

It was this clear view of her waiting Lord that imparted to her such calmness and self-possession, that she could arrange her earthly affairs with reference to her departure, and dispose of her effects to weeping relatives, as mementos of her ardent affection.

"Am I dying?" she inquired at last. "We think you are almost home," one replied. "Yes!" she responded, "almost home! I am! I am!" With these words she fell asleep in Jesus.

"Asleep in Jesus! blessed sleep,
From which none ever wakes to weep;
A calm and undisturbed repose,
Unbroken by the last of foes.

Asleep in Jesus! O, how sweet
To be for such a slumber meet!
With holy confidence to sing,
That death hath lost his venom'd sting!"

Mrs. Bradford was born in Cornish, N. H., June 9, 1831, and was the daughter of Levi and Calista S. Cobb. She went through a thorough course of education at the Meriden Academy, in that State, where she was graduated in 1853. She would have completed her studies one year earlier, but for the symptoms of incipient consumption, which admonished her to accept an invitation to teach at the South. Prior to her residence at the South, she taught in this town, and subsequently was the preceptress of Francistown Academy, N. H., where she endeared herself to a large circle of pupils and patrons of the Institution. As a teacher, she was successful in winning the affections and confidence of her pupils, and they survive to lament her decease, and thereby express her worth. The relation which a faithful teacher sustains to the community where he or she toils is one of great interest. This sphere of useful labor creates new ties of friendship and love which time seldom destroys. The devoted instructor finds a hearty welcome to the homes and hearts of the parents. They respect and love him or her because their children do. In this way, a teacher often secures a place in the affections of many which few others ever enjoy. Hence, the death of one of this class, male or female, becomes a public affliction, when cut down in the midst of useful labors. Although the deceased had ceased to act in this capacity, yet, it is hoped that the recollection of those days, when she stood in this relation to some before me, will be sanctified, through her peaceful death, to their spiritual good.

Bereaved Husband! Your cup of sorrow is filled to overflowing. That mysterious Providence, which rejoices one and afflicts another, has mingled

a bitter portion for you. Once God put out the "light of your dwelling," and you were left a widower. His kindness, in due time, supplied your loss, and gave you a new home. You had scarcely become settled therein, before disease warned you that another bereavement was inevitable. Slowly, but openly, the destroyer advanced, and again you are a widower. Surely you may adopt the language of the inspired penman—"Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and thy footsteps are not known." "Clouds and darkness are round about him." "How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" For your departed companion you have no reason to mourn. Your loss is her gain. You could not ask for her a richer inheritance than "to be with Christ." That surpasses all that the heart can conceive, or the imagination portray. May her amiable life and triumphant death not only strengthen your Christian hope, but ever be cherished among the precious recollections of your life. May you bow submissively to this heavy stroke, and be able to say, with Paul—"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen; for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For I know that, if our earthly house of this tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

Widowed mother! Your share of sorrow in this world has been ample to teach you not to depend upon earthly things for happiness. One after another of your comforts have been removed; but your Christ is left. What a portion was this to your deceased daughter! It was all she asked for support in an exchange of worlds. It is all *you* need to sustain you under this heavy bereavement. Sorrow you may, and must, perhaps; for the heart refuses to be divorced from it. Another has said—"Every other wound we seek to heal, every other affliction to forget; but this wound we consider it a duty to keep open, this affliction we cherish and brood over in solitude. Where is the mother who would willingly forget the infant that has perished like a blossom from her arms, though every recollection is a pang? Where is the child that would willingly forget a tender parent, though to remember be but to lament? Who ever, in the hour of agony, would forget the friend over whom he mourns?" There is a kind of consecrated delight in these sad memories. It is well to cherish them. Yea, more; it is duty to cherish them, along with cheerful submission. You need not be told to cherish them. You cannot help cherishing them. At the same time, may your faith in God be so unwavering, that you can say with the Psalmist—"The Lord will command his loving kindness in the day time, and in the night his song shall be with me, and my prayers unto

the God of my life." "Why art thou cast down, O! my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise him who is the health of my countenance, and my God."

Afflicted Brothers! In the depth of your grief, you may wish that your departed sister were back to earth; but a second, deliberate thought will certainly lead you to decide for her present abode with Christ. When the angel of death spreads his dark wing over a circle like yours, it seems like a blight upon all that is worth possessing on earth. So many hopes are dashed by a single blow, and so many plans swept away by a single gale of sorrow, that the spirit sees little but gloom and darkness. But you mourn not as "others who have no hope." Better evidence of genuine trust in God you certainly cannot have in the last hours of a beloved friend. You may very properly adopt the following sentiment of an unknown poet:—

"Peace to thee, sister—peace. We weep that thou
Hast left us thus alone; our fairest flower
Faded in spring-time beauty; our first star
Gone out at eventide. With thy soft smile,
And the glad music of thy gentle voice,
And all the spells with which thou'dst garnered love.
Thou hast passed from us; and in grief we tread
Life's desert pathway onward, sorrowing much
That thy beguiling ministry will cheer
Our weary steps no more. But O! for thee,
For thee, our sister, o'er a sinless heart,
Folding a seraph's garment—to thy lip,
In the first thirst of an immortal thought,
Lifting an angel's chalice—who can weep?"

There is a lesson in this providence for every member of this community. The deceased was connected with us by three distinct and peculiar ties. She first came to our midst—a teacher. She went away, and returned (her family having removed to this town while she was absent, teaching)—to become a bride. Again she left; but a few swift months brought her back—to die. These three eras of her experience constitute her life in our midst. But this three-fold cord is now broken, and she who was known only to be beloved, lies silent in death. Her dying communication to fourteen friends with whom she regularly corresponded, was—"Be faithful, that we may meet in heaven!" Could we unseal those marble lips, and restore that palsied tongue, such would be her language to every one. From the coffin and the grave's cold bed she would speak earnestly, eloquently, of Christ, the "sinner's Friend." But her voice is silent. Yet,

by her death, she says to every witness—"Be ye also ready; for in such an hour as ye think not the son of man cometh!"

"In the cold, moist earth we lay her,
Now the forest casts the leaf,
And we weep that one so lovely
Should have a life so brief.
Yet not unmeet it is that one
Like this young friend of ours,
So gentle and so beautiful,
Should perish with the flowers."

